Beyond Table Stakes
Five Questions to Ask a Managed Cloud Services Provider
“The golden age of cloud computing is on us,” say some experts. “It’s the fourth industrial revolution,” say other visionaries. “That may be true, but it’s growing exponentially more complex,” say many CIOs, IT and application leaders.

Whether you are a business leader looking for agility and innovation or an IT leader looking to reduce costs or meet business goals, public cloud presents unprecedented opportunities. The vast majority are in agreement: over 70% of businesses have embarked on digital transformation, and nearly 100% of those businesses cite migration to public cloud as part of their strategy.

Some IT leaders already have a public cloud strategy, while some need expert advice to design a multi-year transformation roadmap based on their specific goals and challenges. Research has found that 89% of IT leaders are looking to external consultants to help with strategy. Many IT leaders require help with migrations that are tailored to their applications and that deliver value from cloud capabilities. For example, 93% of companies face barriers to migrations, whether that’s integrations, data integrity, or simply managing workloads. And many need support to manage and optimize their cloud investments so that they can be free to focus on critical initiatives and innovation.

It’s clear that migrating to and managing a public cloud environment is no simple task. In 2017 alone, Amazon Web Services launched 1,430 new features and services and Microsoft Azure added closer to 1,800. And, like IT leaders from 53% of companies at a similar tipping point, you’re probably thinking it isn’t realistic for you and your colleagues to keep up with this rapid-fire pace of innovation. The exponentially increasing levels of complexity and the seemingly endless possible directions to take with public cloud are enough to make most CIOs and IT teams’ heads spin.

A managed cloud services provider could be the answer to alleviating the dizzying effects of getting the most out of an investment in the cloud.

Now, if you’re already reeling from the complexity and pace of change in the public cloud space, engaging with a managed services provider shouldn’t be an equally maddening exercise. You want to be sure you select the right partner to support your journey to your target state. Not all cloud service providers are created equal, so it’s important to know what to look for — and what to watch out for — when evaluating providers to support your cloud migration and management strategy.

Read on for five beyond-the-table-stakes questions to ask when evaluating a managed cloud service provider.

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1 CIO Agenda Report, Gartner, 2017
2 Cloud: Driving Digital Transformation, Ensono and Cloud Industry Forum, 2018
3 Connecting the Business – Unlocking Digital Transformation Success, Ensono and Cloud Industry Forum, 2018
1. How will you help us align our IT strategy with our business goals?

As Brett Moss, Senior Vice President of Business Development and Global Alliances at Ensono, says, “A great cloud services provider won’t come in with a preconceived idea of exactly what you need. As the client’s partner, it’s important to build deep knowledge and foster a sense of client intimacy so that you understand the business needs and then determine the best technology to match.”

A consultative cloud services provider that knows its differentiating value is rooted in insight and expertise, and the team you are evaluating should be asking you questions that sound like:

- What are the business goals and challenges that you aim to impact with cloud migration?
- What is your vision for the role cloud technology will play in your business transformation?
- What needs to change to build stronger alignment between your business and IT functions?

You’ll notice these questions are not about this cloud vs. that cloud or your interest in machine learning or IoT. Before making any recommendations or helping you make a decision about your cloud strategy, a great managed services provider will strive to understand the ins and outs of your business – and where it’s heading.

“A cloud services partner must be both a technical advisor and a business advisor,” adds Sean Roberts, General Manager of Microsoft Cloud Services at Ensono. “When you are first partnering with a managed cloud provider, a question back to you as the client should be, ‘What kind of IT organization do you want to become?’”

The bottom line: what a cloud services provider asks of you could prove just how client-focused and attuned to your business needs they really are.

2. How will you help us successfully migrate from point A to point Z?

Every organization embarking on a cloud migration initiative is unique, with its own starting point, its own target state, and its own challenges to consider when bridging the gap. While a managed services provider may have some proven frameworks or guiding principles for supporting cloud migrations, when you ask this question, you want to hear an answer conveying that your initiative won’t be slotted into a cookie-cutter approach.
“No two cloud migrations are exactly the same,” says Roberts. “If the starting point is understanding the business and the way IT can better support business innovation, then there’s no way a cookie-cutter approach would suffice. A great partner will first conduct an assessment with the client to set the tone for technical recommendations.

“Part of the reason why organizations seek out managed cloud services providers in the first place is to take over a lot of the complexity of migrating to and managing a cloud environment,” he adds. “The complexity aspect isn’t coming from the AWS or Azure side only; there is inherent complexity in your business that adds nuance to a migration strategy. You need a partner that can help you manage to that unique intersection point of IT complexity.”

When you ask this question of a potential cloud services provider, listen for an answer that expresses an abundance of experience handling all sorts of migrations and an understanding that your organization’s migration to – and through – the cloud will have its own nuances to consider.

3. How will you help us achieve our performance goals?

When an organization is considering outsourcing the management of its enterprise IT environment to a third party, trust plays a major role. If you ask this trust-focused question of a cloud services provider, and the answer you hear starts and ends with the basics of security and availability, you should press for more.

“It’s not enough for a managed cloud services provider to simply deliver on its SLAs and metrics,” says Michelle Egan, Vice President of Client Experience and Success at Ensono. “When a client hires us to guide a migration from mainframe to the cloud, or to support a new hybrid cloud strategy, we are expected to deliver, and we are judged on the insights we can provide.”

To inspire trust, a cloud services provider needs to go further than the basics and walk you through a monitoring and management approach that doesn’t simply alert you to incidents but makes recommendations so that you can avoid them in the first place.

“As an example, our proprietary IT governance layer, Ensono M.O., enables our team to provide deep insights into a client’s environment, mainframe to cloud, hardware to software,” Egan continues. “Even beyond insight, we can provide foresight: our blend of intelligent applications allows us to proactively identify potential incidents, so we can communicate those risks to our clients before they become real problems. When our clients are trusting us with their valuable IT infrastructures, this proactive approach to client service is essential for a successful partnership.”

Trust builds over time, but you should look for a partner that can prove from the start that they are equipped with the tools to earn – and keep – your confidence.
4. Will I hear from you only when there is a problem?

“A great cloud services provider values transparency,” says Egan. “The team can’t be afraid to have honest conversations with clients, whether that’s offering new ideas, alerting them to potential risks, or asking them, ‘How are we doing?’”

Ultimately, you want to be sure you can separate the providers that think of themselves purely as technical vendors and those that know a managed cloud services provider’s role is to be a forward-looking consultant that can provide counsel early and often throughout the engagement.

“The reality is, when you hire a managed services provider, you’re giving up total control of your cloud environment. This may signal a major change in how your IT department operates, so, you will want to be sure your provider understands not only your current and target IT states, but what’s needed to support you over the long term,” says Egan.

“IT is a journey,” adds Roberts. “There is never a point where you’ll say, ‘OK, we’ve done it, our IT journey is now complete.’ If we buy in to the idea that we are supporting our clients on a journey, it’s our role as an expert partner to offer consultation and support along the way. If we simply turn things on and let them run, we aren’t doing our job.”

When you’re evaluating services providers and wondering what the engagement will be like after contracts are signed, ask this question to get a better idea of what the client experience would be like.

5. How will you help us drive strategic innovation?

If a managed cloud services provider’s answer to this question leads with of-the-moment buzzwords like “serverless,” “DevOps,” or “infrastructure as code,” this could be a red flag. The answer you really want to hear in this situation is “the focus of our business is supporting our clients to reach their goals.”

“A managed services provider should be hyper-focused on helping its clients to be great,” says Moss. “It’s our role to help clients get to the next place in their IT journey. When you partner with a provider that has imagination and true client focus, you can scale faster, transform more thoughtfully, and elevate IT to be a strategic partner of the business.
“We’re not in the business of providing technical services,” he adds. “We’re in the business of helping our clients take their next strategic leap so they can optimize their IT and innovate their business.”

While any managed cloud services provider worth evaluating will have IT expertise and could rattle off a list of technical capabilities, it’s important to find the right partner that champions a truly client-centric model.

THE NEXT PHASE OF YOUR IT JOURNEY

Knowing you’re at a tipping point in your IT journey is half the battle. Selecting the right managed cloud services provider to be your IT partner and feeling confident in your choice is the other. With these questions – alongside a set of your own – you will be able to get a strong idea of the potential partners you’re evaluating and can begin imagining what it would be like once the contract ink dries.

Want to know how the Ensono team would answer these questions? Get in touch to put us to the test.